DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 859 FL 024 535

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TITLE Authenticity in K-12 ESL Textbooks.
PUB DATE Mar 97
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (31st, Orlando, FL, March 11-15, 1997).
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; Classroom Techniques; Educational Strategies; English for Academic Purposes; *English (Second Language); Grade 6; Instructional Materials; Intermediate Grades; *Language Role; Language Usage; Middle Schools; *Prior Learning; *Relevance (Education); Second Language Instruction; *Textbook Content; *Textbook Selection
IDENTIFIERS *Authentic Materials

ABSTRACT

Discussion of the authenticity of materials contained in English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) textbooks for elementary/secondary school use focuses on content designed to accelerate academic language development and highlights the experiences of one teacher with one textbook. The approach taken is that integrating language and content, while taking into account learners' prior experiences, can create a context for academic language learning in ways that engage learners authentically with meaningful input and the language for making connections with learner realities in both school and community. Definition of authenticity is examined from several perspectives. The textbook discussed is from the "Scott Foresman ESL: Accelerating English Language Learning" series; the chapter highlighted is from a grade 6 unit on dinosaurs that is designed to integrate science and mathematics content, social studies, language arts, and authentic literature. The context in which the materials were used is a middle school ESL class with students of varied linguistic backgrounds. Classroom techniques used to exploit text content (activating and building on prior knowledge, providing cognitively engaging input with appropriate contextual supports, using language actively to connect prior knowledge and thematic content) are described. Standards for assessing the authenticity of textbook content are outlined. Contains 11 references. (MSE)

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ED 407 859

Authenticity in K-12 ESL Textbooks

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Paper presented at the 31st Annual Convention
Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages
Colloquium on 'Authenticity in Language Teaching and Materials Development'
Orlando, Florida, March 11-15, 1997

FL 024 535

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Authenticity in K-12 ESL Textbooks

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Although the notion of authenticity has received much emphasis in second language education, the term itself is elusive and slippery. By some definitions, authenticity cannot be achieved in published ESL materials because they are not written by and for native speakers. By other definitions, authentic texts cannot be written for the purpose of language instruction. Fortunately, discussions of authenticity for second language learning materials have moved beyond such narrow positions, which apply primarily to text origin. One strength of an authentic approach is its emphasis on connecting classroom activities with real world experiences.

What, though, constitutes the 'real world'? This is a question posed not only by language educators but by all content area teachers, especially those who are working with the national standards. Mark Saul (1997, p. 183), in an editorial titled 'Common Sense: The Most Important Standard' in the March issue of the *Mathematics Teacher* answers the question clearly for many of us:

> As a classroom teacher, I have an operational definition: if it holds my students' attention, it is in their real world. If it does not, it is not. My job is to bring more mathematical thinking into their 'real world.'

As language educators, our task is to bring language, thinking, and content into our students' 'real world.' Building on this notion, authenticity can be viewed in a much broader perspective, taking into account the learner, the sociocultural context of the classroom, the nature of classroom interactions, and the content of material. The result, I believe, is that we can claim authenticity for ESL textbooks when they meet certain conditions. In this paper, I give particular attention to ESL textbooks, elementary and

secondary, which are designed to accelerate academic language. I argue that integrating language and content, while taking into account learners' prior experiences, can set up the context for academic language learning in ways that engage learners authentically with meaningful input and the language for making connections with learner realities at school and in the community.

Definition of Authenticity

Various definitions of authenticity have been presented over the past twenty years. (See Taylor, 1994 for a review.) As Cronin (1993) states, authenticity is relative, a continuum. It is not a global absolute. Taylor (1994, p.5) points out that, "authenticity is a function not only of the language but also of the participants, the use to which language is put, the setting, the nature of the interaction, and the interpretation the participants bring to both the setting and the activity." Furthermore, Taylor adds that the classroom itself is a real place that creates its own authenticity. Real language is used, although classroom discourse obviously has its own specific characteristics . Learners bring to the classroom setting their own knowledge, experiences, and expectations. This, of course, is not to say that all learners understand, accept, and engage in the conventions of classroom discourse. Each learner is a unique individual contributing to the culture of the classroom. What may be authentic for one learner may not necessarily be so for another. Authenticity is further differentiated for ESL materials in the extent to which they set the conditions for authentic instruction and achievement. The design of materials can set the learner up for a possible authentic experience - or it may not. We know from the past that the pattern of ESL textbooks was such that learners were not easily lead into any kind of authentic engagement in the classroom.

Authenticity and ESL Textbooks in the Classroom

To illustrate how materials written for ESL learners can be authentic, I share the experience of an ESL teacher, Nicki Weaver, in using a chapter from the *Scott Foresman ESL: Accelerating English Language Learning* series (Chamot, Cummins, Kessler, O'Malley & Wong Fillmore, 1996). The chapter entitled "Digging Up Fossils" is from the unit *Ideas in Conflict - Digging up the Past* in the Grade 6 textbook. This chapter on dinosaurs, as all others in this elementary series for grades 1 through 8, is built on an instructional framework which follows components discussed in Cummins (1996) for accelerating academic language. To focus on authenticity, I will consider three:

- Activate prior knowledge / Build background knowledge
- Provide cognitively engaging input with appropriate contextual supports
- Use language actively to connect prior knowledge and thematic content input

Each unit, based on the CALLA approach (Chamot & O'Malley, 1994), integrates content from science and / or mathematics, social studies, language arts, and closes with authentic literature related to the theme. Explicit teaching of learning strategies is a key feature of this approach, which also makes extensive use of cooperative learning, process writing, authentic assessment, and home-school partnerships to build a community of learners. A culminating unit project is designed to provide a hands-on, cooperative experience resulting in a product to be shared with friends and family.

Nicki's decision to pilot the *Scott Foresman ESL* materials was in part based on the composition of her ESL class, middle school students at varying levels of English language proficiency. Of 15 students, 11 were Hispanics. Two were from the Philippines and one each from Thailand and Vietnam. She wanted material that would allow for participation of the beginning learners while keeping the interest of the more advanced students. She wanted the material to be challenging but not overwhelming. It was also important that the

book would appear to be 'authentic' to the learners, not, as one student put it, look like 'a baby book'. It was of value that the ESL textbook could take an equal place among the other content area textbooks.

Aware that the textbook was designed for second language learners and was therefore not strictly authentic by the standards of text origin, with the exception of the authentic text in the literature section, Nicki asked the question: 'Would the chapter on dinosaurs lead to authentic learning experiences?'

Activate prior knowledge / Build background knowledge

Whitmore and Crowell (1994, 69), among others, maintain that "...classroom learning is authentic when it capitalizes on the language, experiences, and interests that children bring to school with them and when it reflects the world outside the classroom."

All of the students had seen the movie *Jurassic Park*.. As a result, each one had a point of reference to begin the study of the chapter on dinosaurs. Nicki began by doing a K-W-L chart (Know-Want to Know- Have Learned), a strategy suggested in the teacher's edition. Because the students were familiar with the topic, everyone was able to participate in this activity. A whole class period was devoted to discussing what students already knew about dinosaurs. Even the normally most reluctant speaker contributed to the conversation. As a class, the students wanted to learn answers to the questions: *Why did the dinosaurs die? Did they live at the same time as people lived? Did they eat people*?

An activity that seemed to engage everyone at the beginning of the chapter was the listing of the dinosaur's scientific names. Nicki describes dealing with this section this way:

It soon became obvious that I didn't know the correct pronunciation of the names. This put us all on an even playing field. Together we came up with what we believed were correct pronunciations. No one was concerned about making a mistake and everyone tried because there was clearly, at least in my class, no right or wrong answer. We all did the best we could and we giggled at each other's attempts.

This engagement between teacher and learners about something of interest to everyone is rooted in an authentic interaction. It exemplifies an aspect of Breen's (1985) notion of the social nature of authenticity. In viewing the classroom as a unique social context where people come together to learn, he argues that the learner is likely to regard a text as authentic if it is a means of learning the language, tapping into the learner's prior knowledge and engaging with the text. The efforts to work through the taxonomy for dinosaurs, to pronounce highly complex, technical words, and the involvement of everyone, including the teacher, demonstrate aspects of authenticity.

The efforts at pronouncing the new words were followed by an interaction activating prior knowledge. Questions such as *What do you think these dinosaurs were like? Were they fast or slow? Did they eat meat or plants?* triggered extensive conversation and resulted in accurate conclusions. Rationales for answers showed critical thinking. Some students pointed to the development of the thigh muscles in the Tyrannosaurus Rex to account for speed, others mentioned their long legs. One explained that the faster dinosaurs were aerodynamically correct. Even the novice learners could contribute to discussion of the colors of the dinosaurs. And the class further compared and contrasted dinosaurs with animals that exist today. The classroom discourse generated from the activation of prior knowledge was owned by the learners. It had taken place for the real purpose of answering questions important to the group. It was interesting, functional, and authentic.

To further build up, Nicki followed the suggestion in the teacher's edition to brainstorm vocabulary for body parts. She created an entire 'sub-lesson' to meet student needs to learn this vocabulary, using TPR, Simon Says, body part bingo, body part word search, and a rousing rendition of *Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes.*. Because Halloween was approaching, the class drew pumpkins and labeled all the parts of the pumpkin's face. These activities, relevant and important for language learning, enhanced the productivity of the text and the ability to use language needed to make connections to the world beyond the classroom.

Provide cognitively engaging input with appropriate contextual supports

In the next section of the chapter which focuses on providing cognitively engaging input, the question is asked, *How do scientists learn about dinosaurs?* After reading the text, the class went on a mini-field trip to study an extensive display of fossils available to the school. After viewing and discussing the fossils, students returned to their classroom to look at a dinosaur book Nicki had borrowed from the library as well as a calendar of illustrations of dinosaurs and pamphlets from Glen Rose, Texas, the "Dinosaur Capital of the West." Nicki shared her experiences at Glen Rose and had a captive audience when she explained how her own children were able to sit in the huge dinosaur tracks.

Materials designed for purposes other than language learning were incorporated into the section of the chapter on dinosaur fossils and were used authentically in the classroom context.

Nicki describes student engagement with text input:

As we continued working with the chapter, my students led me through many learning experiences. One student, for example, explained to me that the reason the dinosaur tracks were so deep was because the dinosaurs were so heavy. Another suggested that we measure how long the dinosaurs were by walking off paces in the hall way. In this way we were able to visualize how big the animals really were.

A chart presenting the eras and periods in which dinosaurs lived answered the question on the K-W-L chart, *Did dinosaurs live at the same time as man?* The class agreed that the answer was 'no' and concluded that, as a result, no man could ever have been eaten by a dinosaur. Reading the chart presented a challenge for some students so the class used the strategy of making a time line to clarify the content.

In Nicki's words,

The crown jewel of the chapter was the casting of the fossil. For many of the students this was the first time anything like this had ever been presented in an ESL class. Students were fascinated with the clay and the plaster of Paris. There was great concern over mixing the proper amounts of water with the plaster. They were very careful to follow the directions. We discussed order and sequence, we practiced our 'p' sounds, and we learned what petroleum jelly was. Even those whose molds didn't turn out (too much water in the plaster) were still excited about the project. What was most amazing was that the students were so surprised that anyone would go to these efforts on their behalf.

As an authentic learning task, making a mold and a cast to learn how fossils were formed provided practice in following directions, a necessary function in the world. This hands-on experience requiring careful interaction with the text and the materials for making molds brought the concept of fossils to life. Casting fossils was a relevant and authentic learner

engagement with text, with one another, with the teacher - and with elements important to learning.

Use language actively to connect prior knowledge and thematic content input

Critical to authenticity in ESL textbooks are connections to the real world of the learner. That world embraces the school, family, and community. Suggestions for Home Connections occur throughout the teacher's edition. In the dinosaur chapter, suggestions range from making a family time line to asking family members about animals native to the home country.

The chapters in this series end with thematically-related literature originally written for native speakers. For the dinosaur chapter the story is *The News About Dinosaurs* by Patricia Lauber. Margin notes made the text more accessible for students in Nicki's class. By being required to connect the 'old' news with the 'new' news, students were introduced to a strategy for 'compare and contrast' that could be applied in many other learning contexts. Students understood how learning strategies could help them.

When a student found a tip offered in the text particularly helpful, the reaction was visible. As Nicki comments,

It was not unusual to see the look of understanding all over their faces. One student, in a moment of discovery, exclaimed, "I can do this when I read Social Studies!"

The study of fossils was directly connected with content that the students were studying in their science class. The material in the text blended content area concepts with language

needed for academic learning and led to the development of other activities and learning strategies.

A poem at the end of the chapter leads to process writing and the creation of student-generated poems.

As Nicki observes:

Every section challenged the students to use higher order thinking. This chapter led students through authentic learning experiences. This leads me to conclude that authentic learning can take place even when using material that was developed specifically for second language learners rather than native speakers.

Conclusion

I concur with Nicki's conclusion that authentic learning can take place through published ESL textbooks that connect the realities of the learner's world. Authenticity is created when students engage with one another and with the teacher through content meaningful for them in that unique social setting of the classroom. In this, I agree also with Van Lier (1991) who concludes that language made up for the classroom can be authentic because of its meaningfulness to the language learner.

I have used as an example a chapter from the *Scott Foresman ESL: Accelerating English Language Learning* series piloted in a middle school setting. Very similar results occurred with the Heinle & Heinle secondary series, *Making Connections: An Integrated Approach to Learning English* (Kessler, Lee, McCloskey, Quinn & Stack, 1994, 1996). These ESL textbooks come from a philosophical position basically very similar to *ScottForesman* ESL.

Although the series does not make the claim to be an implementation of the CALLA approach, learning strategies, however are treated throughout the series. Unlike the elementary series,*Making Connections* is not based on grade-specific content, a major differentiation. Another is that the series follows the traditional levels of language proficiency. The ScottForesman series is based on content selected from mainstream content area texts for the grade level. We piloted a unit from Book 2 of the *Making Connections* secondary series with two very diverse groups, neither of which represented the secondary school audience for whom the materials were originally intended. One group was an adult ESL class composed largely of Hispanic women but also including students from various parts of Asia. The other group was made up of 24 incarcerated Latino adults in an ESL / GED class at a Texas state prison. Our intent was to study authenticity of these materials for populations other than secondary school learners. The teachers in both settings found that the unit *Choosing Foods*, integrating health, mathematics, social studies and literature provided critical elements for authentic learning. Activities required higher order thinking, generated extensive discussion, and provided opportunities to connect the textbook activities with ideas and circumstances relevant to the learner's life inside and outside the classroom. The classroom atmosphere in both settings was one of cooperation and collaboration with textbook content extended through other authentic resources available. The teachers in both settings found that the materials were 'in the real world of their students' as Saul (1997) describes it.

Classroom implementation of units from the elementary and secondary ESL textbook series discussed in this paper exemplify authentic achievement as defined by the five standards of authentic instruction proposed by Newmann and Wehlage (1993). Although not designed for ESL contexts, the standards, constructed as five point scales of measurement, provide a framework for assessing the authenticity of instruction using ESL textbooks. I have not

attempted to apply a rating, but, rather, to use the standards to provide a qualitative, holistic assessment. The five standards include:

1. Higher order thinking. This requires students to synthesize, generalize, explain, hypothesize or engage in other cognitive processes to construct new meanings. Engagement with the material on dinosaurs and with that on foods, health, and nutrition required higher-order thinking through a variety of these processes.

2. Depth of knowledge. This standard refers to the substantive nature of the content. In each classroom setting, students dealt with central ideas of the topics, constructing explanations and developing new, relatively complex understandings, from understanding fossils and dinosaurs to nutrition and health.

3. Connectedness to the world. This addresses the extent to which instruction has value and meaning beyond the classroom. Allowing students to draw on their prior experiences to gain new knowledge and creating personal meaning permits learners to connect to the larger social context of which they are a part. Activating prior knowledge and making connections to the learners' lives outside the classroom were integral to implementation of both units.

4. Substantive conversations. Features of this standard include considerable interaction about the ideas of a topic, sharing of ideas that are not scripted, and building sustained dialogue that promotes group understanding of the theme. Extensive dialogue occurred in all three settings that we studied - middle school students, adult ESL students, incarcerated ESL / GED students.

5. Social support for student achievement. This standard involves high expectations for learners, a climate of mutual respect, and inclusion of all students in the learning process. The ESL teachers in the settings reported here all held very high expectations of their learners, knew how to establish a climate of respect, and were experienced in making adjustments for learners of varying levels of English language proficiency so that all students were able to engage in the learning experiences.

Authenticity, viewed from a sufficiently broad base, can be a quality of published, commercially available ESL textbooks for the schools. For such materials to be authentic, however, specific conditions must apply to the context established for learning and engagement of learners with the learning community. Conditions which favor academic language learning can also be those which provide for authentic engagement in the classroom context.

Acknowledgment

I would like to thank my former graduate students and ESL teachers Nicki Weaver, Margaret Arballo, and Len Wheeler, who conducted pilot studies of the ScottForesman and Heinle & Heinle materials with their students. Their appreciation for the critical role of the teacher in providing authentic contexts and engagements in classrooms contributed substantially to achieving authenticity in the use of these materials.

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